

## **DRAFT DECISION NOTICE**

### **East Face Vegetation Management Project Environmental Analysis**

USDA Forest Service  
Wallowa-Whitman National Forest  
La Grande Ranger District  
Union and Baker Counties, Oregon

An Environmental Assessment (EA) that discusses the proposed East Face Vegetation Management within the 47,636 acre planning area on the La Grande and Whitman Ranger Districts of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and the Vale Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is available for review at the La Grande Ranger District Office in La Grande, Oregon.

Due to the different administrative review processes for each of the agencies, separate decisions will be issued for the US Forest Service and the BLM lands. This decision notice documents the decision for the 46,412 acres of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest within the East Face project area. A separate decision notice will be issued by the BLM for the 1,224 acres (see table 8 for a summary of these acres/treatments) they manage within the project area.

#### **The Decision**

Based on the analysis described in the EA and associated project record, it is my decision to implement Alternative 2, as modified below, as the method of treatment and management of these National Forest lands. This decision addresses the purpose and need elements for the project with a focus on improving stand health and meeting the goals of the Cohesive Wildfire Strategy (CWS) to restore and maintain landscapes, create fire adapted communities, and improve fire response times. Treatments are designed to manage stocking levels, reduce surface fuel loadings, ladder fuels, and canopy bulk densities in strategic locations throughout the project area. Strategic locations include stands along key roads within the project area; ridge tops, private land interface areas, recreation areas and residences, and along the La Grande Municipal watershed boundary. Strategies for creating fuel reduction areas include the treatments described below. This alternative provides for opportunities to use prescribed fire across boundaries in the Elkhorn Wildlife Area, private lands, and onto BLM lands.

Alternative 2, as modified will modify fire behavior in the area, accelerate stands toward Old Forest (OF) stand structures, retain important areas providing landscape connectivity, protect unroaded areas, and provide wood products and forestry related employment opportunities to benefit local and regional economies. In addition to the vegetative management described below, road management in terms of re-closing existing closed roads at the completion of the project and decommissioning of roads that have grown in, are creating resource problems, or provide duplicate access would also occur.

Alternative 2 modified responds to the following key issues: 1) Modification of potential fire behavior; 2) Departure from Historic Range of Variability; 3) Economics; 4) Improvement of long-term forest health conditions; 5) Protection of Unroaded Areas; 6) Maintenance of landscape connectivity; and 7) Road Access.

#### **Preferred Alternative Description:**

Based on public comments received during the comment period I have decided to make the following modifications to Alternative 2:

- Non-commercial fuel reduction treatment units (PCT, WFH) on less than 35% slope, within a half mile of road access will be added to Alternative 2 for biomass removal (PCT-Bio and WFH-Bio) as analyzed and disclosed under Alternative 5. Note: if there is no market for the biomass within these units, the PCT and

WFH would still occur and slash treatments would be the same as those described under Alternative 2 for each unit.

- The seasonal closure period within the Clear Creek Cooperative closure area will be extended to include 3 days prior to archery season to the end of second rifle bull elk season. The closure period within the Indian-Gorham Cooperative Closure area will also be extended to this same period of time with the exception of the 7315 road system (road number 7315000 and all tributary roads from the gate to the end of the road) which will remain closed year round per Forest Order 258.
- Closed roads re-opened for this project and then re-closed will be monitored post-project for the effectiveness of the closure. Should any of the closures exhibit signs of being breached by motor vehicles, those roads would promulgated to restrict motor vehicle use and signed for 5 years to allow the roads to revegetate and recover.
- In order to eliminate impacts to several fishbearing streams discovered to contain Bull trout during field work for this project, Units 104 (26 acres) and 105 (18 acres) will be changed from commercial harvest to non-commercial precommercial thinning (PCT) and temporary roads T-21 (0.42 miles) and T-22 (0.45 miles) would be dropped. Removal of the log culvert in T-22 will be accomplished as an enhancement project to improve fish passage and habitat. In addition to reducing impacts to Bull trout and riparian areas, this change is also responsive to concerns over impacts to undeveloped areas.
- Units 113 (29 acres) and 114 (21 acres) will also be converted to non-commercial PCT eliminating the need for temporary roads T-24 (0.75 miles), T-25 (0.25 miles), T-26 (0.5 miles), and T-27 (0.11 miles) where culvert installation and removal would negatively impact bull trout within the perennial fishbearing streams. Removal of the existing log culvert in T-26 will be accomplished as an enhancement project to improve fish passage and habitat.
- Further field reconnaissance indicated that Unit 106 is not economically feasible to harvest because it requires an extensive amount (3-4 miles) of costly road reconstruction to open a currently closed road for very low volume/value per acre for a skyline harvest system. This unit will be deferred from harvest consideration in this entry and construction of temporary road T-23 (0.24 miles) will no longer be needed.

In addition to the above, the following activities would occur during implementation of Alternative 2 as modified:

***Commercial Fuels Reduction & Vegetation Management Treatments:***

The following fuels reduction and vegetation management treatments would occur within the project area to address the purposed and need (see also maps in Appendix A):

Fuels treatments have been designed to reduce stand densities in overstocked stands, reduce fir encroachment in pine-dominated stands, remove ladder fuels and heavy down fuel loadings, create defensible fuel profile zones in strategically sound locations, return fire as a disturbance factor on the landscape, and promote healthy fire resilient stands.

**General Mechanical Prescriptions:**

Associated with harvest units the following activities would occur:

1. Treatments would reduce overstocking of trees less than 7" dbh to recommended stocking levels per plant association.
2. All snags  $\geq 12$ " dbh would be retained unless they present a safety hazard to workers or public.
3. Down wood will be retained at levels described under the Wildlife mitigation measures in this Chapter. All other materials  $>3$ " in diameter could be reduced to 3 tons or less per acre.

**Fire/Fuels Units (FFU) –** These non-harvest units (refer to alternative descriptions for unit numbers and acres) would receive a mechanical fuels reduction treatment designed to increase the effectiveness and implementation of the proposed prescribed burning. The following treatments may occur within the proposed FFU unit boundaries:

- Thinning/cleaning of trees less than 9" dbh
- Mastication (slash-busting ) on slopes less than 30%
- Lopping and scattering thinning slash
- Pruning on leave trees
- Hand piling of thinning slash and natural fuels concentrations
- Grapple piling of thinning slash on slopes less than 30%

**Fuels Reduction Mechanical (WFM)** - consists of pre-commercial sized tree density management followed by a surface fuels reduction using a combination of hand work, mastication (slash busting) or grapple piling where surface fuel loadings exceed 15 tons/acre. Mechanical activities would not be allowed within INFISH buffers in these units. Affected units are: 313, 315, 342-343, 356, 362, 364, 367, 373, 380, 384, 386, 394, 396, 412, 424-425, 429, 431, 436.

**Table 1 - Commercial Treatment Acre Totals by Silvicultural Prescription for Alternative 2 modified**

<b>Prescription</b>	<b>Acres**</b>
Commercial thinning - HTH	3,478
Sanitation harvest – HSA	210
Shelterwood Harvest - HSH	297
Partial Removal - HPR	5
Improvement harvest - HIM	2,169
Fuels Harvest - HFU	245
Patch Openings – HPO	143*
Biomass Removal – WFH-Bio	391
Biomass Removal – PCT-Bio	2,151
<b>Total Commercial Treatment</b>	<b>9,089</b>

\*Includes HPO treatments in HIM/HPO and HTH/HPO units

\*\*USFS acres only

**Sanitation harvest (HSA)** prescription is designed to remove diseased and insect damaged trees and associated trees with a high potential to become infected. The trees to be removed with this prescription in East Face are a mix of Douglas-fir and western larch with mistletoe. The treatment will remove those trees with multiple mistletoe brooms and reduce the incidence of future mistletoe. The objective in these stands will be to promote non-susceptible species in the understory. Affected Units: 2, 20, 128, 133

**Thinning harvest (HTH)** prescription is designed to stimulate the growth of the desired residual trees by reducing stand density. Affected Units: 1, 12, 19, 22, 33-34, 48, 55-62, 64-65, 68-69, 72, 74-78, 80, 91-92, 94-98, 102-106, 111-112, 115-116, 119-120, 122, 129, 131, 140, 143-145.

**Shelterwood harvest (HSH)** prescriptions in which a stand of trees is established through a series of cuttings designed to facilitate establishment of a new cohort of trees. It will also move stands toward more seral species composition and promote understory forage and browse. Due to site conditions, scattered overstory trees are retained to provide some shade or site protection for the regenerating stand beneath it and materials for future down wood recruitment. Affected Units: 13-14, 21, 39-40, 44, 51, 89, 93, 108, 114.

**Partial Removal harvest (HPR)** prescription is the partial removal of the overstory over an established understory. Trees retained in the overstory are at levels adequate to meet green tree recruitment needs. Affected Units: 17.

**Improvement harvest (HIM)** thinning and removal of undesirable trees (poor form, damaged condition, ecologically inappropriate species etc.) within a stand for the purpose of improving the growth, composition and quality of the remaining stand. Affected Units: 6-11, 15-16, 18, 23-27, 29-30, 32, 35-38,

41-43, 45, 47, 49-50, 52-53, 63, 67, 70-71, 73, 79, 81, 86-88, 99-101, 109-110, 113, 117-118, 121, 123-126, 130, 132, 134, 141-142, 146.

**Fuels Harvest** (HFU) prescription in which trees creating ladder fuels and excess down dead woody material are removed offsite with the use commercial harvest methods. Affected Units: 28, 31, 46, 66, 127, 135, 138-139, 147.

**Patch Openings** (HPO) prescriptions treat about 10% of the stand to create gaps that will promote early successional structure and early seral species such as western larch, ponderosa pine and/or western white pine. The goal of these treatments is to create heterogeneity in stands that are predominately even-aged lodgepole with some associated species. Prescription would create small canopy openings (4 to 6 acres) focusing on promoting pine and larch to improve stands resilience to wildfire and insect and disease outbreaks. Most of these stands would also have an intermediate thinning treatment outside the openings reducing densities down to approximately 100 trees per acre. Planting would be used in patch openings to supplement natural regeneration and meet stocking requirements where needed. Affected Units: 82-85 and portions of 43, 55-57, 59-61, 65, and 146.

**PCT Biomass Removal (PCT-Bio)** – In the event future biomass markets support commercial removal, small diameter trees thinned during pre-commercial thinning will be removed from the site. Affected Units: 304-305, 308-309, 317-320, 332-333, 337, 354, 365, 368, 375A, 376A, 381, 399, 402-403, 422.

**WFH Biomass Removal (WFH-Bio)** - In the event future biomass markets support commercial removal, trees cut to reduce fuel ladders and manage understory densities will be removed from the site. Affected Units: 302-303, 328, 340, 371, 378, 383.

#### **Post-harvest follow-up:**

Units would be monitored following harvest activity for site preparation, regeneration, or stand improvement needs. Reforestation work will be accomplished on sites that are below recommended stocking levels (180 – 300 trees per acre depending on the site) through planting or natural regeneration. Other post-harvest treatments may include precommercial thinning, site preparation and/or fuels reduction with fire, grapple/slashbuster manipulation of slash, and site preparation by whip felling.

### ***Non-Commercial Fuels Reduction & Vegetation Management Treatments***

**Table 2 - Non-Commercial Treatment Acre Totals for Alternative 2 Modified**

<b>Prescription</b>	<b>Acres*</b>
Pre-Commercial thinning - PCT	1,186
Fuel Reduction by Hand – WFH	4,793
Fuel Reduction Mechanical - WFM	1,455
Fuel Reduction Non-commercial - FFU	0
<b>Total Non-Commercial Treatment Acres</b>	<b>7,434</b>

\*USFS acres only

#### **General Handwork Prescriptions:**

**Fuels Reduction Hand Work Only (WFH)** - treatments are designed to remove ladder fuels and manage understory tree density at appropriate levels using manual methods. Ladder fuels are defined as trees (less than 7" DBH) growing under the drip line of the dominant and co-dominant trees within the project area. These trees provide a ladder for flames into the crowns of the larger trees increasing the probability for high crown fire. Dead and down fuels will also be also be piled and burned. Affected units are: 301-

303, 306-307, 310-312, 316, 325, 328, 335-336, 338, 340, 353, 355, 357-359, 361, 366, 369-372, 374, 377-379, 383, 390-393, 395, 397-398, 400-401, 404-409, 414-415.

**Pre-commercial Thin (PCT)** - Manual pre-commercial thinning of past harvest units would result in variable spacing (14-20 feet between trees) including retention of approximately 10% of untreated area to provide for wildlife habitat needs. Species preference will be western larch, ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir. Riparian areas may be treated as described below. Affected units are: 304-305, 308-309, 314, 317-321, 323-324, 326-327, 329-334, 337, 339, 341, 345-352, 354, 360, 363, 365, 368, 375-376, 381-382, 385, 387-389, 399, 402-403, 410-411, 413, 416, 422-423.

**Prescribed Burn Units** - Over the next 10 years, prescribed burning will occur when weather and fuel conditions are appropriate to meet the objectives for each unit. No more than 10% of the available forage within the project area would be burned per year. Existing plantations and precommercial thinning areas would be avoided during burn layout and implementation. Control lines would include roads, machine lines, hand lines and natural barriers.

**General Prescribed Fire Prescriptions:**

1. Fires would generally be low intensity (1-3 foot flame lengths).
2. Desired fuel loading would be as listed in the following table:

**Table 3 - Fuel Size Class**

Fuel Size Class	Desired Tons/Ac	Lineal Feet
0-3" Diameter	<2	0
3-9" Diameter	<3	0
12" Plus Diameter	5	120-140

- a. Trees  $\leq$  2" dbh would be reduced to desired levels.

Mechanical fire lines (less that 2ft wide) would be constructed between road segments or natural barriers to provide containment lines prior to unit ignition. Burning along private land boundaries would be coordinated with adjacent landowners.

With the exception of the RHCA hand treatment units described below, all other treatment units calling for the use of prescribed fire would not permit direct ignition within 300' of any Class I, 150' for class III stream channels and 50' of Class IV stream channels. Low intensity fire would be allowed to back into all RHCAs. Reducing these fuels will enhance forage habitat and increase overstory growth rates by making nutrients readily available after burning is completed.

Approximately 6,496 acres of prescribed burning will be implemented within the area over the next 10 years. Affected units are: 600 – 614.

**Table 4 - Prescribed burning block acres for Alternative 2 Modified**

Prescribed Burning	
Burn Block	Total Acres*
601	967
602	183
603	1,317
604	514
605	440
606	158
607	658
608	182

Prescribed Burning	
Burn Block	Total Acres*
609	223
610	513
611	775
612	341
613	152
614	73
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,496</b>

\*USFS acres only

### **Alternative Design Criteria**

**Riparian habitat conservation area (RHCA) treatments** – 785 acres of RHCA vegetation will be manually thinned to reduce overstocking and facilitate development of future large woody debris, and reduce fuel loadings. Handwork only would occur in RHCAs. Precommercial thinning units (PCT) and hand treatment only fuel reduction units (WFH) would have no activity buffers of 10 feet along class IV streams (intermittent non-fishbearing), 30 feet on class III streams (perennial non-fishbearing), and 50 feet along class I streams (fishbearing). No mechanical treatment or commercial removal would occur within RHCAs. Depending on the amount of slash generated, hand piling and hand burning of slash piles would occur outside of no activity stream buffers.

**Riparian habitat conservation area (RHCA) treatments** – Affected units: 301, 306-307, 310-312, 314, 316, 326-327, 335-336, 353, 355, 357, 359, 366, 369, 376-377, 382, 387, 392-393, 395, 397, 401, 404, 406-410, 414.

- If biomass is not removed, the following units may still receive RHCA treatments – 302, 304-305, 308-309, 318-320, 328, 332-333, 368, 376A, 383, 399.

**Direct ignition for prescribed fire would occur within treated RHCAs** – Within RHCA treatment units described above, minimum stream buffers for direct ignition during prescribed burning are:

Class I streams = 100 feet,  
Class III streams = >75 feet  
Class IV streams = >50 feet

Affected burn blocks: 601, 603-607, 610-612.

**Scenic Resources Protection** – In order to meet the intent of high to moderate scenic integrity along areas viewed from the Elkhorn Scenic Byway, the Anthony Lakes Recreation Area, Forest Road 7312, Wolf Creek Road 4315, and Forest Road 4300 a variety of criteria such as retention of large trees, screening, low stumps, and marking trees on the side away from these roads, etc. will be coordinated with the project Recreation Specialist and applied to treatment units during layout, marking, and implementation.

Affected units: 1, 8, 10-12, 15-17, 19, 21-22, 46, 48, 50-51, 55-56, 59-63, 74, 91, 102, 112, 115-116, 119-124, 128, 130-134, 147, 301, 306-307, 311-320, 328-329, 335-336, 341, 353-355, 377-378, 401, 404-410, 413, 431.

**Connective Corridor Units** – The goal within connective corridor units will be to maintain and enhance their canopy closure and structural complexity. Snags, large down wood, and multiple canopy layers (if appropriate for the site) will be maintained in these stands. Basal area will be maintained within the upper half of the management zone, which would approximate canopy closures in the upper 1/3 of site potential. Stocking levels would be managed near the upper management zones for basal area except where tree

quality and crown conditions are such that this level of stocking is unattainable, in these areas, 20% of the stand would be retained in untreated clumps. Trees with as little as 20% live crown will be retained if needed to maintain basal area levels. All snags greater than or equal to 12 inches dbh will be retained. Down logs will be retained at the following levels:

- 200 lineal feet per acre
- Minimum lengths of logs 20 feet or largest available
- Minimum of 12" small end diameter logs or largest available

Affected units: 11, 15, 20, 16, 39, 58, 100, 122, 128, 133, 132, 308, 311, 403, 431

**Snag Guidelines** - With the exception of snags removed for safety or construction clearing, no snags >12 inches dbh would be removed within these units.

Protect existing standing large snags (>12 inches, DBH) during firing operations through avoidance or fuels distribution requirements (FDR) as practical. If large trees are killed through project implementation, they will be left for wildlife snags, unless they pose a safety hazard to roads, the public, or project personnel.

### **Removal Systems Summary:**

Proposed harvest treatments are estimated to result in removal of approximately 22.6 million board feet of saw and non-saw material using the following yarding systems.

- Skyline based yarding systems 1,012 acres
- Ground based yarding systems 7,744 acres
- Helicopter yarding systems 333 acres

No new permanent road construction is proposed with this project. In addition to regular road maintenance activities on roads used to facilitate harvest activities, approximately 59.5 miles of road reconstruction would be proposed to fix/prevent sediment issues.

Approximately 9.15 miles of temporary road construction are proposed to facilitate harvest systems. Almost half of those miles are on existing wheel tracks on the ground and would require very little in the way of ground disturbance to be used for harvest activities. Temporary roads would be treated after use by implementing some or all of the following activities: installation of erosion control devices, subsoiling to reduce soil compaction, seeding, and blocking or camouflaging roads to discourage further use. 84.1 miles of currently closed roads will be re-opened to facilitate harvest and fuel reduction activities. In general, currently closed roads opened to facilitate project activities would be reclosed at the conclusion of fuel reduction/harvest activities (refer to the post sale road management plan section below and attached map). If winter logging is done using the 4300, 4300020, 4300095, 4300100, 4315, 4316, 4330, 4350, 7312, or 4380 roads, use would be coordinated with the District Recreation Manager to designate an alternative snowmobile route while log haul is occurring.

Danger trees (standing trees that present a hazard to people due to conditions such as, but not limited to, deterioration or physical damage to the root system, trunk, stem, or limbs and the direction of the lean of the tree would allow that tree to reach the roadway if it fell) would be cut along all haul roads (approximately 15 trees/mi). If the trees are within no-activity RHCA buffers as described previously or needed to meet down wood requirements they would be cut and left on site. If they are outside of those areas or not required for other resource needs and are of commercial value, they may be removed with this timber sale.

### **Road Right-of-Way and Bridge Replacement**

The 7312 road is a primary haul route for the East Face project area. Due to weight limitations the bridge on the 7312 road over the North Fork of Anthony Creek is unsafe for log haul. The old bridge will be physically removed and a new bridge installed.

Right-of-Way (ROW) access will be acquired for 0.37 miles of road 7302 across privately private lands adjacent to the project area in order to facilitate logging and fuel reduction activities. Access is not going to be needed in the long term on 2.17 miles of the private road north of Pilcher Creek Reservoir which accesses forest road 4315952 and a temporary road use permit will be acquired. If the road is needed for public access and future management, easement acquisition will be pursued (refer to Alternative maps in Appendices A-C).

### **Forest Plan Amendments**

As a part of Alternative 2 modified, Forest Plan Amendment Sections 1-3 (as described in the Common Elements Section) would amend the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). Refer to tables in Appendix A for treatment prescriptions by unit.

#### **Section 1: Treatment in Old-growth Below HRV – Forest Plan Amendment**

Stand density treatments throughout the project area have been designed to not only reduce fuel loadings to meet the goals of the Cohesive Wildfire Strategy but also to improve tree health and enhance long-term old growth characteristics. Forest Plan standards restrict harvest treatment in LOS that is below HRV without any regard for the location of these stands on the landscape. An HRV analysis of LOS, by potential vegetation group has been completed for this project area and as described in the issues section of this EA, indicates deficiencies in both OFSS and OFMS structure within some potential vegetation groups, with OFSS being nearly non-existent. OFMS structure is more prevalent in the project area. Some stands which were historically OFSS have developed into OFMS due to fire exclusion.

Due to need to reduce ladder fuels and wildfire risk in LOS stands located within key strategic fuel reduction corridors in the Anthony Lakes and Rock Creek Bulger Flats wildland urban interfaces and immediately adjacent to 20 miles of private land boundaries along the face of the Elkhorn Mountains, the following modification is made to the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, Regional Forester Amendment #2, for the East Face Vegetation Management Project Planning Area. This modification would facilitate successful development of defensible fuel profile zones (DFPZs), especially in areas adjacent to the private land boundaries and WUIs associated with this project area.

**Current Direction:** d. Scenario A. If either one or both of the late and old structural (LOS) stages falls below HRV in a particular biophysical environment within a watershed, then there should be no net loss of LOS from that biophysical environment. Do not allow timber sale harvest activities to occur within LOS stages that are below HRV.

**Amended Direction:** d. Scenario A. If either one or both of the late and old structural (LOS) stages falls below HRV in a particular biophysical environment within a watershed, then there should be no net loss of LOS from that biophysical environment. However, fuel reduction activities (including timber harvest) may occur within LOS stages that are below HRV, if doing so would better meet LOS objectives by moving the landscape towards HRV, achieve fuel reduction objectives within key strategic fuel reduction corridors, and continue to provide LOS for the habitat needs of associated wildlife species.

Treatments include commercial thinning (HTH) of trees less than 21 inches in diameter, reducing levels of standing and down material, thinning and cleaning of small diameter trees, pile and burn, and prescribed



burning. Treatments under this amendment would not result in a net loss of old growth, but the amendment would provide for treatments that would maintain old growth habitat as defined by Forest standards and definitions. Old growth habitat is measured by levels of down wood, snags, number of canopy layers and large trees (See Regional Forester's amendment #2 –screens- and Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Recommended Definitions for New Structure Stages per Amendment #2, November 9, 1995).

Trees > 21 inches dbh would not be cut. Treatments would move multi-strata stands towards single-strata stands while maintaining adequate levels of down logs and snags within strategic fuel reduction areas.

## **Section 2: Treatment in Allocated Old Growth (MA15) - Forest Plan Amendment**

Treatment in a portion of the allocated old growth located in T7S, R37E, Section 11 is proposed to provide a continuous fuels reduction treatment along the 73 Road. This allocated old growth area is strategically located on the ridgetop along the 73 road on the southern boundary of the project area and adjacent to a WUI.

The Forest Plan does not address treatment needs that reduce fuels and modify fire behavior in old growth within or in close proximity to this WUI. The Forest Plan does say under Timber at 4-90, "areas allocated to old-growth timber will have no scheduled timber harvest although salvage may occur following catastrophic destruction if a more suitable replacement stand exists." The exception to salvage following catastrophic destruction has little utility since this old growth area is healthy, functioning old growth. The direction prohibiting scheduled timber harvest also has little utility since treatment objectives are fuels reduction and modifying fire behavior not only within the old growth stand but immediately adjacent to this WUI and the Twin Mountain Inventoried Roadless Area. These objectives give little consideration to timber harvest or commercial viability.

Due to the lack of direction from the Forest Plan to provide fuels reduction criteria for entering old growth within or adjacent to this WUI, the ID team with Forest support, recommends that a site specific Forest Plan amendment be included as a component of the proposed action to reduce fuels and modify fire behavior in a portion of the allocated old growth located in T7S, R37E, Section 11.

The following guideline is being added to clarify compatibility and use of fuels reduction treatments in 75 acres of the Management Area 15 area located in T7S, R37E, Section 11:

**Wildland Urban-Interface Guideline.** Mechanical and non-mechanical fuels reduction is permitted within 75 acres of the allocated old growth stand located in T7S, R37E, Section 11 located immediately adjacent to the Rock Creek/Bulger WUI to meet fuels treatment objectives. Where treatments are applied they shall retain old-growth characteristics and move the treated portion of the stand to OFSS stand structure.

The amendment would allow fuels reduction prescription treatments within this 75 acre portion of allocated old growth. Treatments would include commercial thinning of trees under 21 inches, removing dead standing and down material, whipfelling and cleaning of small diameter trees, handpiling and jackpot burning. Treatments under this amendment would not result in a net loss of old growth, but the amendment would provide for treatments that would maintain old growth habitat as defined by Forest standards and definitions. Old growth habitat is measured by levels of down wood, snags, number of canopy layers and large trees (See Regional Forester's amendment #2 –screens- and Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Recommended Definitions for New Structure Stages per Amendment #2, November 9, 1995).

The treated portion of this area would remain designated as allocated old growth. This amendment would not change the allocation as designated under the Forest Plan and would apply to this project area only. No trees >21 inches would be cut.

### **Section 3: Treatment in MA6 – Commercial and Non-Commercial Harvest in WUI**

Treatment in the backcountry recreation area (MA6) located in the project area is proposed to provide fuels reduction within the Anthony Lakes WUI near the Floodwater Flats Recreation Tract, and the Anthony Lakes campground and ski area.

The Forest Plan does not address treatment needs that reduce fuels and modify fire behavior in areas allocated to MA6 within or in close proximity to the Anthony Lakes WUIs. Due to the lack of direction from the Forest Plan to provide fuels reduction criteria for entering MA6 within or adjacent to the WUI, the ID team with Forest support, recommends that a site specific Forest Plan amendment be included as a component of the proposed action in order to reduce fuels and modify fire behavior in strategic areas to protect recreation facilities and the Floodwater Flat Recreation Tract located in T7S, R36E, Section 7 along NFS road 7300160. These treatments will also introduce heterogeneity into a very homogenous overstocked landscape at growing risk to attack from insect and disease. While the Forest Plan at page 4-69 allows for harvest to prevent the spread of insects on adjacent lands it does not specifically provide for fuel reduction treatments within WUIs.

The following guideline is being added to clarify compatibility and use of fuels reduction treatments in the Management Area 6 area:

**Wildland Urban-Interface Guideline.** Mechanical and non-mechanical fuels reduction is permitted within a portion of MA6 located within and adjacent to the Anthony Lakes WUI to meet fuels treatment objectives. Treatments to maintain the integrity of the DFPZ would occur every 15-20 years. Where treatments are applied they shall maintain and improve recreation and visual characteristics.

This area would remain designated as MA6. This amendment would not change the allocation as designated under the Forest Plan and would apply to this project only.

Affected units are:

- Section 1 – Treatment in LOS below HRV (97 acres): Units 19, 119, 129, 131.
- Section 2 – Treatment in MA15 (75 acres): Unit 134
- Section 3 – Treatment in MA6 (804 acres) : Units 138, 139, 307, 309-312

#### *Post-Sale Road Management Plan (refer to map in Appendix A):*

A road management plan (refer to attached map) has been developed for the East Face project area. In general, the current open road system will remain the same following implementation of the East Face Vegetation Management project with the exception of the roads below which will have the following changes:

- Roads 7312100, 7312140, 7312400 – would be remain open following project implementation because current road densities are well below Forest Plan standards in this area and these roads were identified as not creating any resource damage and currently being used by the public.
- 7312150 road – is a dead end drawbottom road which would be closed to protect water quality.
- All or portions of roads 7320, 7300140, 7315, 4320, 4320150, and 4315800 are closed year round or seasonally and are important access roads within WUI areas which would be closed again following

use in this project; however, closure would be with a gate to allow for ease of access during fire suppression activities.

- With the exception of the roads described above, any road currently closed by gate or barricade to be re-opened and used to facilitate harvest/fuel reduction activities would be re-closed at the conclusion of harvest activities within the units they access.
- 31.3 miles of roads identified as either duplicate access or no longer needed on the landscape for resource management and recreation access and would be decommissioned, returned to resource production, and removed from the road system. Many of these have grown in and have not received any use in the last 20 years.

#### **Enhancement Activities:**

- A. **Whitebark Pine Restoration** – Treatment within these units will be by hand only and entail clearing of all small trees within 25 feet of whitebark pine trees to reduce competition and improve tree vigor and protect them in the event of wildfire in the area by changing fire behavior in their immediate area. Large overstory trees will be retained. The remainder of the unit will be treated following the primary prescription described above for that unit (PCT, WFH).

Affected units: 305, 307, 309-313, 315-317, 431.

- B. **Aspen Enhancement** - Where aspen is encountered in non-commercial treatment units, treatments around them will be coordinated with the project Wildlife biologist to enhance aspen habitat. Conifers that encroach upon aspen stands compete for the limited resources of moisture, nutrients and light. Aspen are shade intolerant and susceptible to conifer competition and without disturbance, conifers will eventually overtop the aspen, reduce aspen over story and contribute to aspen stand collapse. The objective of conifer reduction in aspen stands is to reduce shading and competition to increase aspen sprouting and expansion. Reducing conifer competition will allow the aspen component the greatest ability for survival. In stands where aspen and conifers have less than 20% canopy closure both species can successfully coexist. Partial conifer retention would allow old tree conservation, stream shading and maintain diversity of conifer species. Conifer basal area will be reduced to below 20% canopy cover to reduce shading for 60 to 150 feet from the last aspen stem, and large, old conifers will be retained. Downed trees will be placed around the exterior of the aspen patch to block browsing. If hand piling and burning is implemented, the piles will be established at least fifteen feet away from aspen boles to protect from radiant heat damage.
- C. **Fish Passage Barrier** - The culvert on Wolf Creek on the 4316800 road has been identified as a fish passage barrier. This culvert will be either removed or replaced to allow for fish passage to high quality habitat above the culvert.

#### **Mitigations and Monitoring:**

Mitigation measures incorporated as part of this decision include specific treatment design features as well as a variety of specific resource measures described in the Proposed Action and Alternatives section of the EA on pages 45-60. Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines that apply to Management Areas 1, 3, 3A, 6, 15 and 16 were also incorporated into project design.

Monitoring of project activities incorporated into this decision is discussed on pages 65 through 68 of the EA.

#### **Alternatives**

A range of alternatives to the Proposed Action was considered in this analysis based on public scoping and feedback. The alternatives described below were considered in detail based on the purpose and

need of the project and the key issues and public feedback on the Proposed Action as described in the Public Involvement and Tribal Consultation section (EA pages 8-18) of this assessment. Forest Service management objectives are incorporated into alternatives by following standards and guidelines of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Plan as amended.

**Alternative 1** - No Action

This alternative constitutes the "No Action" alternative. Fuels reduction, timber harvest, and other management activities identified in the East Face analysis area will be deferred. This alternative forms a baseline for comparison of the action alternatives.

**Alternative 2 Modified** – [Refer to map and data tables in Appendix A of the EA]

This is the preferred alternative as described in the EA and under The Decision above. Treatments for this alternative are summarized in table 5 below.

**Alternative 3** - [Refer to map and data tables in Appendix B]

Design of this alternative reflects the general purpose of meeting the goals of the Cohesive Wildfire Strategy (CWS); however, it focuses more intently on responding to the key issues related to retention of old growth, road access, landscape connectivity, and retention of unroaded areas. Alternative 3 was developed by using Alternative 2 (the proposed action) as a base and incorporating the following changes:

Retention of Old Growth habitat:

- No treatments within Allocated Old Growth stands (MA15)
- No commercial logging within any LOS stands below HRV

Retention of Unroaded Areas:

- No treatment within unroaded areas – Units 104 and 105.
- Use only non-commercial harvest fuels reduction within the MA6 portion of the Anthony Lakes Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) area.

Road Access:

- No construction of temporary roads
- No reconstruction/use of roads identified as overgrown

Landscape Connectivity:

- No regeneration harvests (HPO or HSH)
- No treatment within connective corridor units

Refer to the map and data tables in Appendix B for specifics. Treatments for this alternative are summarized under the Alternatives at a Glance Table 6 below.

**Alternative 4** - [Refer to map and data tables in Appendix B]

This alternative was designed to meet CWS goals; however, it focuses the most intensive commercial and non-commercial treatments to reduce surface fuel loadings, ladder fuels, and canopy bulk densities in Priority 1 treatment areas (as described in Common Elements section above). Alternative 4 was developed using the Alternative 2 (the proposed action) as a base and incorporating the following changes within each Priority Area:

- Priority 1 areas - Treat all commercial and non-commercial units as proposed in the Proposed Action within this area to ensure treatment within wildland urban interface areas, along private land interface areas, and adjacent roadless and wilderness areas.
- Priority 2 areas - Change commercial treatments to non-commercial within all units within Priority area 2 to focus treatments along strategic road systems and ridgetops within the project area but reduce the impacts associated with timber harvest activities on other resources.
- Priority 3 areas – Within this priority area, treatments would be focused on dry potential vegetation groups which would have historically had a more frequent fire regime within them.

Refer to the map and data tables in Appendix B for specifics. Treatments for this alternative are summarized under the Alternatives at a Glance Table 6 below.

**Alternative 5** - [Refer to map and data tables in Appendix C]

This alternative focuses on optimizing commercial removal of woody materials while meeting the goals of the CWS. In addition to the treatments designed to reduce surface fuel loadings, ladder fuels, and canopy bulk densities in strategic locations throughout the project area, additional overstocked acres within Priority Areas 2 and 3 and biomass removal opportunities were also considered for treatment under this alternative.

The elements common to action alternatives described previously and the follow elements are also part of this alternative:

- Non-commercial fuel reduction treatment units (PCT, WFH) on less than 35% slope, within a half mile of road access were also analyzed for biomass removal opportunities (PCT-Bio and WFH-Bio). This market is highly variable and commercial removal of this product is largely based on its current market value. Because this is a rapidly developing market and new techniques for the removal, processing, and use of wood fiber are being developed every day, opportunities for utilizing this product are being analyzed in this alternative to maintain options for commercial removal in the future. Note: if there is no market for the biomass within these units, the PCT and WFH would still occur and slash treatments would be the same as those described under Alternative 2 for each unit.
- To mitigate the additional miles of roads to be opened and commercial harvest activities to be undertaken under this alternative, the following adjustments to the timing and methods of road and area closures have been made in the Post-Sale Road Management Plan:
  - Roads that had grown closed which were reopened for this alternative would be promulgated and signed restricting motor vehicle use once the road has been closed. These promulgations will remain in place for the next 5 years.
  - The closure periods for the Clear Creek and Indian-Gorham Cooperative Closure areas will be extended to include 3 days prior to archery season to the end of second rifle bull elk season.

Refer to the map and data tables in Appendix C for specifics. Treatments for this alternative are summarized under the Alternatives at a Glance Table 6 below.

**Table 5 – Summary of Alternative 2 Modified (Note: the totals in this table do not include BLM acres)**

Alternative Elements		Alt 2 Modified
<b>Total Commercial and Non-Commercial Acres</b>		<b>16,523</b>
<b>Harvest Treatment Acres (total)</b>		<b>9,089</b>
Total Acres Treated by Prescription Type (Commercial)  *HPO includes treatments in HIM/HPO and HTH/HPO units	HFU	245
	HIM	2,169
	HPO*	143
	HPR	5
	HSA	210
	HSB	297
	HTH	3,478
	WFH- Biomass Removal	391
	PCT- Biomass Removal	2,151
<b>Noncommercial Treatments</b>		<b>7,434</b>
Total Acres Treated by Prescription Type (Noncommercial)	PCT	1,186
	WFH	4,4793
	WFM	1,455
	FFU	0
<b>Post-Treatment Activities</b>		
<b>Post-Treatment Activities (Acres)</b>	Precommercial Thinning	195
	Grapple Pile/Slashbuster	7,227
	Handpile & Burn	3,290
	Planting	440
	Whipfelling	6,557
	Burning for Site Preparation	127
	Jackpot Burn	3,211
<b>Prescribed Fire (Acres)</b>	Total Burn Block Area	6,496
<b>Treatments within RHCAs (Acres)</b>	Precommercial Thinning Treatments	38
	Hand Fuel Reduction Treatments	747
<b>Yarding Systems (Acres)</b>	Ground Based	7,744
	Skyline	1,012
	Helicopter	333
<b>Road Work (Miles)</b>	Reconstruction	59.5
	Temporary Roads - Total	9.15
	• Miles on Existing	3.57
	• Miles of New	5.58
	Miles of Closed Roads Opened	84.1
<b>Enhancement/Safety Work</b>	Danger Tree Removal	Yes
	Culvert Replacement for Fish Passage	Yes
<b>Harvest Volume in million board feet (MMBF)</b>	Sawtimber Volume	16,004
	Non-Saw Volume	6,636
	<b>Total Volume (MMBF)</b>	<b>22,640</b>

## East Face - Alternatives at a Glance\*

Table 6 – Alternative Overview – (\*Note: the totals in this table include BLM acres proposed for treatment)

Alternative Elements		Alt 1	Alt 2	Alt 3	Alt 4	Alt 5
<b>Project Area Boundary (PAB) Acres</b> USFS – 46,412 acres Vale BLM – 1,224		0	47,636			
<b>Total Harvest/Noncommercial Treatment Acres</b>		0	17,098	13,654	16,500	18,036
<b>Harvest Treatment Acres (total)</b>		0	6,722	3,879	2,844	10,221
Total Acres Treated by Prescription Type (Commercial)  *HPO includes treatments in HIM/HPO and HTH/HPO units	HFU	0	245	139	155	245
	HIM	0	2,200	1,198	1,255	2,886
	HPO*	0	143	0	0	143
	HPR	0	43	43	38	43
	HSA	0	210	62	122	210
	HSH	0	318	0	120	318
	HTH	0	3,563	2,437	1,154	3,816
	WFH- Biomass Removal	0	0	0	0	391
	PCT- Biomass Removal	0	0	0	0	2,169
<b>Noncommercial Treatments</b>		0	10,376	9,775	13,656	7,815
Total Acres Treated by Prescription Type (Noncommercial)	PCT	0	3,447	3,372	6,682	1,277
	WFH	0	5,184	4,658	5,184	4,793
	WFM	0	1,745	1,745	1,700	1,745
	FFU	0	0	0	90	0
<b>Post-Treatment Activities</b>						
<b>Post-Treatment Activities (Acres)</b>	Precommercial Thinning	0	195	116	26	195
	Grapple Pile/Slashbuster	0	10,704	6,842	8,568	8,083
	Handpile & Burn	0	2,102	3,090	4,099	3,929
	Planting	0	461	0	129	461
	Whipfelling	0	6,682	3,879	2,834	7,621

*Draft-Draft-Draft-Draft-Draft-Draft-Draft-Draft-Draft-Draft-Draft-Draft-Draft-Draft*

Alternative Elements		Alt 1	Alt 2	Alt 3	Alt 4	Alt 5
	Burning for Site Preparation	0	127	0	26	127
	Jackpot Burn	0	3,835	2,820	2,823	4,150
<b>Prescribed Fire (Acres)</b>	Total Burn Block Area	0	6,685	6,043	6,643	6,685
<b>Treatments within RHCAs (Acres)</b>	Precommercial Thinning Treatments	0	238	225	238	45
	Hand Fuel Reduction Treatments	0	753	612	753	747
<b>Yarding Systems (Acres)</b>	Ground Based	0	5,295	3,239	2,092	8,350
	Skyline	0	1,094	416	419	1,450
	Helicopter	0	333	224	333	421
<b>Road Work (Miles)</b>	Reconstruction	0	53	39.3	27.8	61.6
	Temporary Roads - Total		12.62		2.62	14.71
	• Miles on Existing	0	6.01	0	0.67	6.57
	• Miles of New		6.61		1.95	8.14
	Miles of Closed Roads Opened	0	107	66.9	38.6	122.7
<b>Enhancement/Safety Work</b>	Danger Tree Removal	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Culvert Replacement for Fish Passage	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Harvest Volume in million board feet (MMBF)</b>	Sawtimber Volume	0	16.4	9.3	6.6	18.8
	Non-Saw Volume	0	5.5	3.2	2.4	7.5
	<b>Total Volume (MMBF)</b>	0	21.9	12.5	9.0	26.3



## Comparison of How the Alternatives Respond to the Key Issues

The following table compares each alternative with the key issues and key indicators identified in the public involvement section of this EA.

**Table 7 – Alternative Comparisons**

Comparison Factors		Alternatives					
Key Issue	Key Indicator(s)	1 (with BLM)	2 (with BLM)	2 Modified* (*No BLM Ac)	3 (with BLM)	4 (with BLM)	5 (with BLM)
Fire Behavior Potential	Acres of Treatment by Priority Area						
	• Priority Area One	0	8,619	8,054	7,358	8,619	8,686
	• Priority Area Two	0	7,856	7,856	6,058	7,856	8,379
	• Priority Area Three	0	623	613	238	25	971
	Fire Size (One hour after ignition) in Acres	59-85	0.2-0.3	0.2-0.3	0.2-0.9	0.2-0.9	0.2-0.3
	Fire Rate of Spread (chains/hour)	43-52	3	3	3-6	3-6	3
	Flame Length (feet)	45-54	1-2	1-2	1-3	1-3	1-2
	Torching Index	0	255-496	255-496	39-225	39-225	225-496
	Crowning Index	26-42	45-70	45-70	31-45	31-45	45-70
Old Growth	Acres of OFMS restored to OFSS	0	770	770	429	457	770
	• Dry OFSS Percent HRV	40-60	40-60	40-60	40-60	40-60	40-60
	• Dry OFSS Percent Post-Harvest	3	10	10	9	7	10
Economics	Total Investments	0	\$18.8 million	\$21.3 million	\$13.9 million	\$15 million	\$22.1 million
	Wages Earned	0	\$8.2 million	\$9.2 million	\$6.3 million	\$6.9 million	\$9.6 million
	Number of Jobs	0	238.3	263.5	188.1	211.9	275.8
Improvement of Long Term Forest Health Conditions	Acres of Overstocked Stands Treated	0	11,052	10,496	8,399	11,065	11,850
	Percent of Overstocked Stands Treated	0	34%	32%	26%	34%	37%
	Percent of project area change toward desired species cover type	0	37%	37%	29%	36%	40%

Comparison Factors		Alternatives					
Unroaded Areas	Acres of BMFPR PWAs Treated	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Acres of Fuel Reduction Treatments In identified Undeveloped Area	0	543	543	485	525	543
Landscape Connectivity	Acres of disturbance within key connective corridors	0	1,356	1,356	949	1,297	1,356
Road Access	Miles of New Temporary Road Constructed	0	6.61	5.58	0	1.95	8.14
	Miles of Temp Road on Existing Tracks	0	6.01	3.57	0	0.67	6.57
	Miles of Road Reconstruction	0	53	59.5	39.3	27.8	61.6
Road Access	Seasonal Motor Vehicle Use Restrictions Extended (Yes/No)	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
	Miles of Closed Roads Opened for Project Use	0	107	84.1	66.9	38.6	122.7

\*Does not contain BLM acres

**Table 8 – BLM Treatment Acre Summary\***

Comparison Factors		Alternatives 2-5
<b>Commercial Harvest Acres (Total)</b>		<b>71</b>
Acres by Prescription Type	HTH	33
	HPR	38
<b>Non-Commercial Treatment (Total)</b>		<b>475</b>
Acres by Prescription Type	WFM	290
	PCT	185
<b>Temporary Roads Miles (T-1)</b>		<b>0.37</b>
<b>Prescribed Burning Acres (Total)</b>		<b>189</b>
	615	37
	616	39
	617	113
<b>Timber Volumes (Total Board Feet)</b>		<b>300,000</b>

\*Not included in this decision – to be covered in a separate BLM decision.

## **Scoping Process**

The Forest Service consulted the following individuals, Federal, State, tribal, and local agencies during the development of this EA:

The East Face Vegetation Management Project was published in the Wallowa-Whitman Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA), a quarterly publication, in December 2013 and has appeared in each quarterly SOPA since then. This mailing is distributed to a mailing list of individuals, organizations, and agencies and is published on the forest web page. The project and proposed action have also been published on the Wallowa-Whitman Web page at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=41765> and the East Face of the Elkhorn Mountains Project webpage at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/wallowa-whitman/landmanagement/projects/?cid=stelprd3791060>.

The Wallowa Whitman Forest Collaborative established in June 2012, is comprised of more than 40 organizations and individuals passionate about working together on public land management efforts. They engage in landscape-scale analysis and support the USFS' restoration and job creation efforts on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. The collaborative sponsored two public field trips to the East Face Project area on July 24, 2013 and July 23, 2014. They also meet on a monthly basis to discuss and collaborate with the Forest Service on the East Face Project.

East Face information was made available to the public at Miner's Jubilee in Baker City, Oregon in July 2014 and the Union County Fair in La Grande, Oregon in August 2014.

Scoping and consultation for the project was initiated and is ongoing with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR).

Scoping and consultation for the project was initiated and is ongoing with the Oregon Department of Forestry, Natural Resource Conservation Service, and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW).

A detailed description of the proposed action was mailed on January 15, 2015 to approximately 210 forest users, adjacent landowners, and concerned publics soliciting comments and concerns related to this project. Fourteen comment letters were received.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the State Historical Preservation Officer (SHPO). Consultation with National Marine Fisheries Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service for threatened and endangered species will be completed for this project.

An analysis file for this project is available for public review at the La Grande Ranger District. The analysis file includes specialist's reports, data specific to the project, public notifications and their responses, meeting notes, and miscellaneous documentation.

## **Reasons for Decision**

I have chosen to implement Alternative 2 modified because it provides a balanced response to the major issues and concerns while best achieving stated purpose and need objectives aimed at moving this landscape towards desired future conditions outlined in the amended forest plan. This decision reflects thoughtful consideration of public input as well as collaborative discussions with engaged stakeholders. The key issues and specific reasons for this decision follow:

### **Key Issue: Fire Behavior**

Approximately 78 percent of the project area is within fire regimes that would exhibit mixed to high severity stand replacement fires in the event of a wildfire. Of these, approximately 50 percent have a moderate to high departure from the historic fire return interval. There is a long history of large stand

replacing fires within the East Face project area with the most recent being the 4,000 acre 1989 Tanner Gulch fire and the 1,000 acre 2006 Red Mountain fire and the area continues to have a high incidence of fire starts from summer time lightning activity.

Historically, fire was a dominant disturbance process in the Blue Mountains and the fire history within this project area indicates fire has played a major role in shaping the East Face forest landscape. Normally, low intensity fires crept through the drier forests and grasslands every 7 to 35 years while moister sites generally experienced fire every 40 to 150 years. Fire history within the cold forest types show the results of large stand replacement fires as indicated by large expanses of homogenous lodgepole pine across the landscape. Within the other vegetation groups a mosaic of vegetation patterns resulting from a combination of hot, intense fires, and light surface fires can be observed.

A community at risk” (CAR) is defined as a group of homes or other structures with basic infrastructure and services within or near federal land. A wildland urban interface area surrounds a CAR, including a community’s infrastructure or water source, and may extend beyond 1.5 miles of the CAR, depending on topography and geographic features used as an effective firebreak. There are three wildland urban interface (WUI) areas located within the East Face Project Area: Anthony Lakes WUI - 45 structures; Rock Creek Bulger Flats WUI - 124 structures; and the Beaver Creek Watershed – Municipal watershed for the city of La Grande. The areas within and surrounding these WUI’s and along the 20+ miles of private land interface on the eastern side of the project area are considered a high priority for fuel reduction treatments to reduce the risk of undesirable wildfire impacts.

Alternative 2 modified meets the purpose and need of this project by creating strategically located DFPZ’s using a combination of harvest, thinning, pruning, burning and surface fuel reduction treatments. Completed treatments would assist fire managers by reducing potential fire behavior in strategic locations. The DFPZ’s developed adjacent to roads and along key ridge systems combined with improved access associated with road maintenance would improve firefighter response times and provide safe egress from a fire if needed. The DFPZ’s will provide opportunities to contain wildfire size by compartmentalizing the forest landscape. This compartmentalization would provide fire managers with options to utilize confine and contain suppression strategies when appropriate to decrease the potential size of future wildfires and provide future opportunities for fire to be used as a restoration tool. Alternative 2 modified focuses fuel reduction treatments within over 8,000 acres of these high priority areas.

Alternative 2 moves fire adapted ecosystems in the drier portions of the project area towards their range of historic conditions. Treatments are designed to increase the percentage of fire tolerant tree species such as ponderosa pine, western larch and Douglas fir. Reintroduction of fire into the project area will assist with managing, surface fuel loadings promote fire-adapted vegetation and decrease the departure in vegetation characteristics between historical and current conditions.

In summary, forest management and fuel reduction activities in Alternative 2 modified would provide opportunities to reduce undesirable effects of future wildfires through reducing potential rates of spread, and flame lengths in strategic locations within the project area helping to protect important values at risk on private and public lands. In combination with the forest thinning and fuels treatments on adjacent private and BLM lands Alternative 2 modified would help restore and maintain resilient landscapes, create fire-adapted communities, and improve fire response times (EA, pages 70-98) as envisioned by the National Cohesive Wildfire Strategy.

### **Key Issues: Old Growth and Landscape Connectivity**

An analysis of the historic range of variability (HRV) assessing how current forest conditions compared to what is estimated to have existed during the pre-settlement era indicate a strong departure from historic conditions. HRV and connectivity are important to wildlife populations because the distribution, quality

and quantity of habitat largely determine the potential for a wildlife species to exist at viable levels. The following table compares existing old growth acres to the HRV in the project area.

**Table 9 - Comparison of existing old forest to HRV by potential vegetation group (PVG) in the East Face project area**

PVG	Existing Acres	% of PVG	Historical Range %
<b>Old Forest Multi Stratum (OFMS)</b>			
Moist upland	2,277	12%	15-20%
Dry upland	929	10%	5-15%
Cold upland	2,574	16%	10-25%
<b>Old Forest Single Stratum (OFSS)</b>			
Moist upland	27	0%	10-20%
Dry upland	257	3%	40-60%
Cold upland	392	2%	5-20%

The table above illustrates large deficiencies in OFSS for moist, dry, and cold upland sites due to large historic wildfires, salvage harvests, and historic logging operations. OFMS levels are within HRV in dry and cold potential vegetation groups (PVGs) and slightly below in moist upland PVGs.

Connective corridors between old forest areas and those that span the East Face project landscape exist in multiple spots and connect to the adjacent watersheds, most notably to the Grande Ronde River-Beaver Creek watershed. These corridors contain the majority of the old growth and MA15 found within the East Face project area and occur on north and northeast facing slopes. These areas also have the greatest productivity sustaining higher levels of canopy cover and structural complexity. Both local connectivity between late and old structural stands and landscape connectivity of the East Face area with surrounding landscapes were incorporated into the project design for Alternative 2 modified and the other action alternatives. None of the proposed treatments in Alternative 2 modified fragment these identified corridors. The majority of proposed fuels treatments occur adjacent to these identified corridors, and by reducing the risk of loss in the event of a large wildfire, Alternative 2 modified increases the ability to protect these more complex areas that could be negatively impacted by wildfire.

No net loss of late old structure (LOS) will occur with Alternative 2 modified within the project area and OFMS stand structure will be maintained within the HRV in the dry and cold upland forests. Within moist forests, treatment of one OFMS stand along the private land interface will result in a 1% reduction in OFMS by moving the stand to an OFSS condition. While OFSS structure would remain severely below HRV in all PVGs, Alternative 2 modified would move each of the PVGs toward HRV and restore the most OFSS conditions along with Alternative 5. .

**Table 10 - Comparison of Old Growth Stand Structure to HRV after Proposed Treatments**

Structure/PVG	HRV	Alternatives				
		1	2 Modified	3	4	5
OFMS- Moist	<b>15-20%</b>	12%	11%	12%	12%	11%
OFMS- Dry	<b>5-15%</b>	10%	5%	5%	6%	5%
OFMS- Cold	<b>10-25%</b>	16%	16%	16%	16%	16%
OFSS- Moist	<b>10-20%</b>	0.14%	0.7%	0.14%	0.4%	0.7%
OFSS- Dry	<b>40-60%</b>	3%	10%	9%	7%	10%
OFSS- Cold	<b>5-20%</b>	2%	3%	2%	3%	3%

While none of the alternatives affects the large landscape scale connective corridor blocks, Alternatives 2 modified, 4, and 5 would change the quality of connectivity corridors between stands of LOS where these connective stands occur within key DFPZ's. That said, the functionality of these connective stands will be maintained by incorporating treatment prescriptions that retain snags, large down wood, multiple canopy layers (if appropriate for the site) and canopy closures in the upper 1/3 of site potential and retention of 20% of the stand in untreated patches. Silvicultural prescriptions in connective corridor units would reduce competition between residual trees, increase tree growth rates, and increase trees' ability to defend against insects and diseases, while retaining levels of canopy closure and structural complexity to facilitate movement of wildlife between old-growth habitat patches.

In summary, Alternative 2 modified retains late and old forest structures and connectivity across the project area. Alternative 2 modified maintains OFMS levels within the HRV for the cold and dry upland potential vegetation groups and changes 1% of moist forest OFMSS to an OFSS condition. Overall, Alternative 2 modified will restore 0.56 to 7% of the OFSS within the project area. While it would maintain the integrity of the large landscape level corridors it would have short-term impacts on some of the smaller connective corridors between old forest stands. Alternative 2 modified provides for the needs of the wildlife species dependent on old growth habitat in the short term by retaining late and old forest structures and providing for local and landscape connectivity. Alternative 2 modified will also facilitate development of LOS conditions over the long-term through treatment of overrepresented and overstocked understory re-initiation structural conditions, thinning of small diameter young stands throughout the landscape and providing for increased opportunities for fire managers to protect these key areas over time. (EA, pages 98-122)

**Key Issue: Economics**

Forest management activities directly influence the economic, social, and cultural needs of communities surrounding the National Forests. One of the goals of the Wallowa-Whitman Forest plan is to provide for the production of wood products to satisfy National needs and benefit local economies by providing timber sale opportunities and employment associated with a diversity of forestry and restoration related work.

Timber sale contracts are commonly used to accomplish vegetation management objectives and help to create jobs for the local work force, provide revenue to the county and local economies and wood products for local and regional mills. Additional jobs for the local work force or revenue for the county will not be produced under the no action alternative (Alternative One) while Alternatives 2, 3, 4 and 5 will provide varying levels of employment and economic benefit and wood products to our local communities and mills.

The table below summarizes total jobs produced, total wages associated with the jobs produced and total economic output expected under Alternative 2 modified.

**Table 11 - Local Community Economics - (Projected for 5 year project length within Union County)**

Alternative	Total Investments	Total jobs produced	Wages Earned
Alternative 2 modified	\$21.3 million	\$9.2 million	263.5

Alternative 5 has the potential for the largest economic output for investments followed by Alternatives 2 modified, 3, and 4 in that order. Due to current condition of forest stands being proposed for treatment (dense, small diameter, low volume/value per acre) none of the alternatives provide adequate timber value to fully fund needed restoration work. Restoration of the forest and achieving project objectives will require funding and the use of service contracts. These service contracts can significantly contribute to jobs and wages for our local economies along with commercial timber sale activities.

In summary, the income generated by this project contributes to family wage earners and local industries, which in turn support other local businesses, hospitals, and services contributing to the overall economic vitality of northeast Oregon Counties. The East Face Vegetation Management project is part of the larger East Face of the Elkhorns Joint Chiefs Initiative project, which has infused over \$4 million dollars into fuel reduction projects on State, private, and federal lands over the last 3 years. The products produced from Alternative 2 modified would not support the local mills alone, however, when added to the wood products being removed from other State, private and corporate lands, as well as other national forest lands, it contributes to the overall viability and sustainability of local mills and businesses. The suite of activities associated with Alternative 2 modified is estimated to provide seasonal work/benefits for a projected 8-10 years. (EA, pages 122-127). My choice of Alternative 2 modified provides for a variety of economic benefit to our local communities by providing wood products for timber industry, forestry related employment opportunities and promotion of potential non-traditional wood product markets (biomass, post/poles, firewood etc.).

**Key Issues: Improvement of Long-Term Forest Health and Sustainability**

A combination of past management activities and exclusion of fire along with acres of post fire overstocked lodgepole pine stands has led to an increase in stocking levels, fuel loadings, and dense understories. Overstocking, insects, and disease are affecting the resiliency of many stands within the project area. Stands are not growing to their site potential and if left untreated, stand development could stagnate and increase the risk for further loss from insect mortality and wildfire. Mountain pine beetle, western pine beetle, spruce beetle, fir engraver, western spruce budworm, and balsam wooly adelgid populations have shown an increase in activity the last few years as indicated by pockets of recent beetle kill and attacks.

Of the 46,412 Forest Service acres within the project area, approximately 43,396 acres are forested (94% of the Forest Service project area acres). There are 12,534 acres in reserved lands such as allocated old growth, inventoried roadless, and riparian buffers. Of the non-reserved forested acres, 9,121 acres (28% of the available forested acres) have received a commercial entry and 2,991 acres have had a non-commercial treatment in last 35 years.

**Table 12 - Percentage of Treatments across the Planning Area\***

<b>Alternatives</b>	<b>Total Acres Treated</b>	<b>% of Total Available Acres Treated</b>	<b>Commercial Acres Treated</b>	<b>% of Available Acres Treated in East Face-Commercial</b>	<b>% of Available Acres Treated in Project Area-Commercial Last 35 Years</b>
2 Modified	16,523	54	9,089	29	68

\*Does not include BLM acres

Alternatives 2 modified, 3, 4, and 5 include a combination of sanitation/salvage, partial openings, commercial thinning, improvement harvests, shelterwoods, release treatments, fuels reduction activities, prescribed fire, and artificial and natural regeneration. Alternative 2 modified along with past management would result in 68% of the available forest service acres within the project area under active management within the last 35 years which is more than Alternatives 3 and 4 but slightly less than Alternative 5.

Alternative 2 modified addresses the purpose and need for improved forest health by proactively providing for long-term forest resiliency through density reduction, reducing elevated levels of dwarf mistletoe, retention of snags and down logs and promotion of ecologically appropriate species compositions. With lower stand densities and management of ecologically appropriate species compositions, the likelihood and severity of future insect infestations, incidence of disease and severity of wildfire will be reduced. Thinning and fuels treatments will facilitate increased growth rates and development of fire resilient large diameter trees. The combination of vegetation and fuel treatments will

create conditions that favor development of vegetative characteristics that are within the Historic Range of Variability (HRV) and improve overall forest resiliency to future disturbances and potential impacts of climate change.

In summary, all alternatives proactively respond to improving long-term forest health/resiliency issues while meeting the purpose and need of reducing densities in overstocked stands. In achieving the desired condition of maintaining tree stocking and species composition at acceptable levels within the historic ranges, Alternative 2 modified will help to reach this condition at a slightly lower level than Alternative 5 but at higher levels than Alternatives 1, 3, and 4. (EA, pages 127-140)

### **Key Issue: Road Access**

There are approximately 364 miles of NFSR in the East Face project area. Of these miles, 127 miles are managed as open and 237 miles are managed as closed. Approximately 13 miles of the Elkhorn Drive State Scenic Byway traverses the southern edge of the analysis area boundary. Some roads need a significant amount of work to become passable to even high clearance vehicular traffic. The bridge located on road 7312 at the crossing of the North Fork of Anthony Creek is considered structurally deficient prohibiting commercial haul and large truck traffic (empty or loaded) on a key haul route.

Alternative 2 modified includes the following road related activities:

- replacement of the bridge over the North Fork of Anthony Creek;
- reconstruction of 59.5 miles of roads to improve their function and protect water resources;
- reduced miles of temporary road construction from 12.6 miles to approximately 9 miles (nearly half of which is on existing wheel tracks);
- reduced disturbance to bull trout habitat from culvert installation and removal;
- providing 7.5 miles of new motorized loop opportunities for recreational users accessing an area previously not open to motor vehicle use; and
- Installation of gates (replacing earthen berms) on current closed roads identified as important for firefighting activities in order to maintain future fire suppression options in key areas.

Alternative 2 modified will also decommission 31.3 miles of roads identified as duplicate access, not needed for future management and recreation access or located along stream channels and causing negative impacts to water quality and aquatic habitat. All but 2 miles of these roads are currently managed as closed. Fifty percent of the identified roads have grown in, 22 percent of the roads are negatively impacting soil and water resources, and another 5 percent are closed and exhibit no use. Grown in roads will be considered as decommissioned in their current condition unless they are contributing to resource impacts (culverts that could fail, floodplain encroachment, excessive erosion/sedimentation etc.). Returning these roads to resource production will improve security and forage for big game and other wildlife within the project area.

Alternative 2 modified will also extend existing seasonal closure periods in existing cooperative closure areas to encompass the archery and centerfire rifle hunting seasons. The current closures do not encompass the archery season. Extending the closure periods within the Indian-Gorham and Clear Creek Cooperative closure areas will increase big game security during hunting seasons, mitigate disturbances caused by harvest activities, and improve backcountry hunting opportunities.

In summary, with the exception of the temporary road construction, which is not incorporated into Alternative 3, Alternative 2 modified responds to most of the road access issues identified during scoping and represents a balanced approach to providing access while addressing access related effects on other resources.



**Key Issue: Unroaded Areas**

While there are no IRA's within the project area, the East Face project area is immediately adjacent to the southern side of the Beaver Creek IRA, eastern portion of the Upper Grande Ronde IRA and borders the northern edge of the Twin Mountain IRA along the 7300 road. The southernmost tip of the East Face Vegetation Management Project area borders approximately ½ mile of the North Fork John Day Wilderness. None of these areas are within the East Face project area and as such they will not be directly affected by the activities in the East Face project. No lands within the East Face project area were identified with the potential to be recommended to Congress for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System or as Wilderness Study Areas during the Blue Mountain Forest Plan Revision planning process.

The stand types within the IRAs and the North Fork John Day Wilderness historically experienced large stand replacement fires on 50 to 150 year intervals. Exclusion of fire, in conjunction with acres of insect-killed timber, has created high fuel loads. A fire in extreme weather conditions could kill vegetation, sterilize soil, remove shade-producing structure, and reduce soil stability. Severe fire within these areas would not only impact the wilderness and roadless values, but also water quality in the City of La Grande municipal watershed. Defensible fuel profile zones (DFPZs) created under Alternative 2 modified would provide fire managers with strategic areas adjacent to these roadless and wilderness areas from which to control fires possibly coming out of or going into them.

One unroaded area within the East Face project area was identified as ecologically significant during scoping for this project. Alternative 2 modified would not build any roads into this area and only proposes pre-commercial thinning and non-commercial fuel reduction work by hand on 44 acres within this area. These treatments will improve forest resiliency and sustainability over time while retaining undeveloped characteristics.

In summary, under Alternative 2 modified maintains unroaded areas and undeveloped characteristics, and offers greater options and opportunities for fire management activities to protect unroaded and PWAs from loss in the event of a wildfire in the area. Providing safe, strategic options for fire suppression activities will enhance suppression forces options and improve opportunities for potentially containing a severe wildfire to a much smaller area to protect these unique areas and resources. (EA, pages 70-98 and 140-146)

**Other Issues:**

Further consideration of the environmental consequences for other non-key issues is disclosed in the EA on pages 153-288. In review of these consequences, Alternative 2 modified meets the purpose and need while mitigating impacts to soils and site productivity, water quality and fisheries, threatened and endangered species, cultural resources, noxious weeds, other wildlife, visual resources, recreation, tribal treaty rights, and public safety. Alternative 2 modified integrates the purpose and need of the project, meets the legal requirements of National Forest Management Act, meets forest plan direction and protects resources within the project area. (EA, pages 70-288)

**In summary**, my decision to select Alternative 2 modified is based on thoughtful consideration of the wide-spectrum of public and collaborative input and concerns, ecological conditions of the landscape, predicted environmental effects, private and public values at risk to wildfire and socio-economic needs of our local communities. Alternative 2 modified addresses important ecologic and socio-economic concerns in a more proactive fashion than Alternatives 2, 3, 4, and 5 by:

- Providing a variety of socio-economic benefits through implementation of timber sales, biomass removal, restoration and forestry related service work, and providing commercial and personal use post and pole and firewood opportunities. Alternative 2 modified is estimated to result in nearly 23 million board feet of timber, approximately and approximately 263.5 jobs.

- Implementing a suite of activities to restore and promote resilient stand and landscape vegetation conditions and patterns with a focus on treatment of overstocked stands with understory re-initiation, stem exclusion, and stand initiation structures at high risk to future insect epidemics.
- Establishing a network of strategic fuels reduction areas along major roads and ridges within the project area through thinning and fuels treatments on 8,000 acres identified as a high priority within and adjacent to WUI's and along private land interface areas.
- Recognizing the importance and ecologic value of retaining of a mix of treated and untreated areas across the landscape to provide for a diversity of vegetation and associated habitat conditions
- Responding to the landscape level issue of departure from historic forest structural conditions with an emphasis on actively restoring the severely underrepresented old forest habitat by focusing treatments in overstocked young stands to accelerate them toward LOS, and increasing the amount of currently under-represented OFSS conditions
- Recognizing the need for maintaining and promoting dead wood habitat, cover and connectivity at the local and landscape scale for wildlife.
- Reducing the number of stream crossings and potential disturbance to bull trout and their habitat by installing and moving culverts in fishbearing streams and reducing impacts of drawbottom/streamside roads. It also improves fish passage by replacing the culvert on Wolf Creek and removing two wooden culverts which are falling apart and obstructing fish passage.
- Incorporating best management practices, design features and mitigation measures to protect soil, water cultural and wildlife resources.
- Recognizing and protecting tribal treaty rights and traditional cultural practices.
- Utilizing a balanced approach to provide and improve access while addressing access related effects on other resources
- Achieving multiple use public land management objectives in a manner consistent with the amended forest plan, guiding environmental policy, and environmental regulations.

## **Findings**

The East Face Vegetation Management Project Assessment was developed in accordance with the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act, as amended by the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and its implementation regulations codified at Title 36, Part 219 of the Code of Federal Regulations. It also was developed in accordance with Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for Implementing the Procedural Provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (Code of Federal Regulations, Title 40, Part 1508.27). These implementation regulations require specific findings to support decisions subject to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). These findings include (1) Finding of No Significant Impact and (2) Finding of Consistency with Management Direction for the Forest Plan.

### ***Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)***

The selected alternative, with the specified management requirements, constraints, and mitigation measures, provides the best combination of physical, biological, social, and economic benefits.

Based on the site-specific environmental analysis documented in the Environmental Analysis and FONSI on pages 290-292 of the EA, I have found that this is not a major Federal action, individually or cumulatively, and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not needed.

### ***Finding of Consistency with Forest Plan Management Direction***

From the results of site-specific analysis documented in the EA, I conclude that with the exception of the sections amended in this decision, this action is consistent with the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended (EA, Environmental Impacts of the Proposed Action and Alternatives section, pages 70-289).

## **Pre-decisional Administrative Project Review**

As provided by the Pre-decisional Administrative Review process under 36 CFR 218 Subpart A for Forest Service proposed actions implementing land and resource management plan activities documented with a Record of Decision or Decision Notice, legal notice of the objection process was published in the Observer newspaper on XXXXXXXXXX XX, 2016. The 45-day objection period ended on XXXXXXXX XX, 2016. XXXX # of objections were received.

- As allowed under 36 CFR 218.11(a), the objections were resolved during a meeting with the objectors and subsequently withdrawn by the objectors.

OR

- As required by 36 CFR 218.11(b)(1), the objections were considered and responded to by the Reviewing Officer on XXXXXXXX XX, 2016. No further review from any other Forest Service or USDA official and the reviewing officers written response to an objection is available (36 CFR 218.11(b)(2)).

OR

- As allowed under 36 CFR 218.12(c)(2) when no objection is filed within the objection filing period, the Responsible Official may sign this decision notice on the fifth business day following the end of the objection filing period.

## **Implementation**

This project may be implemented immediately upon signature of this decision notice.

For further information, contact Cindy Christensen, Project Analyst, at the La Grande District, 3502 Highway 30, La Grande, Oregon 97850, or telephone (541) 962-8501.

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Thomas Montoya  
Forest Supervisor  
Wallowa-Whitman National Forest

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Date

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